

Chapter Title: Beyond the Pale Blog: Tumblr Pink and the Aesthetics of White Anxiety
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Book Title: a tumblr book

Book Subtitle: platform and cultures

Book Editor(s): Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho, Louisa Stein, Indira Neill Hoch

Published by: University of Michigan Press. (2020)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.11537055.43>

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Beyond the Pale Blog

Tumblr Pink and the Aesthetics of White Anxiety

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Tumblr Pink was *the* color of 2016. By midyear, twitter user @33333333433333 posted the tweet that would launch a thousand think pieces about its ubiquity (figure 33.1). It read “im in a group text about how everything looks like this now” and featured a collage of billboards and branding material from Acne, Kinfolk, Delish, and Thinx Underwear, all in varied shades of matte and muted pink.¹ A host of clickbait articles and online listicles quickly attempted to construct a genealogy of the trend, referring to this range of colors as “Tumblr Pink.” They traced its popularity back through noted pop culture obsessions like the Rose Gold iPhone, the cover art for Drake’s chart-topping “Hotline Bling,” and visuals from Wes Anderson’s *Grand Budapest Hotel*.² But oddly, none of the commentators explained *why* they were connecting this trend to Tumblr.

This essay posits that the aesthetic foundations of the Tumblr Pink trend are reflected in a popular subset of tumblrs called pale blogs, a genre of digital youth culture on Tumblr that glorifies all things #pretty and #pale. Pale bloggers avoid vibrant content and engage a limited visual and affective palette. Although having a large number of followers is valued on pale blogs, questions of authorship or direct personal relationships are not a priority as in other areas of the platform. Rather, the primary mode of engagement is participation in the aesthetic norms of pale blogs by liking, reblogging, and sharing content. So instead of making case studies of individual users’ tumblrs or pale blog networks, my understanding of pale blogging practices developed over several years of observation, by tracking the latest content tagged with #pale or #paleblog. Most pale blog content is sourced from Google, WeHeartIt, Flickr, and other image host-

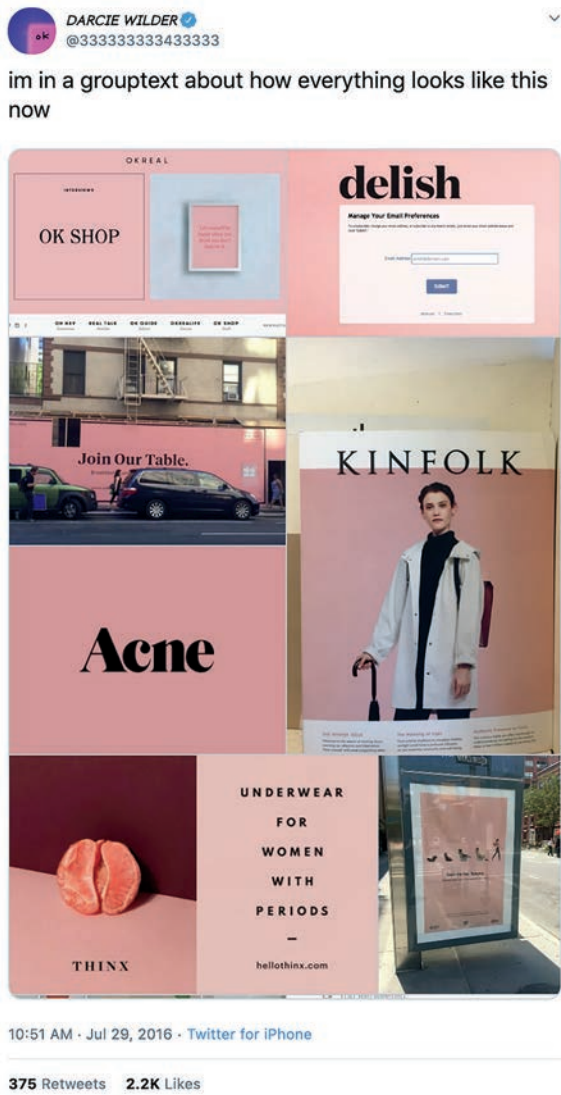


Fig. 33.1. Tweet by @333333333433333, July 10, 2016

ing sites and is circulated uncredited. The most popular images on pale blogs are often downloaded and reposted so many times that their only meaningful tie is to the genre of pale blogging itself, rather than any particular author.³

As this genre has grown in popularity since 2013, users have begun to describe the coolly erotic, cutesy melancholia of the pale blog, almost

benignly, as “A E S T H E T I C,” rejecting the idea that their blogs carry any political charge or bias. Attendant to the racial climate of the 2010s, however, I will argue that pale blogs reflect and rehearse broad social anxieties around the potency of whiteness at a moment when popular discourse has made “white fragility” a widely recognized term and as charges of racism against whites are on the rise.⁴ More than just reflecting the sense of racial anxiety, the curatorial practices of pale blogging manage the discourse of threat by aestheticizing precarity, redefining traditional symbols of white hegemony through associations with beauty and ethereality or weakness: the #pretty and #pale. Whereas many subsets of Tumblr have used the site to establish empowered and active communities committed to social justice, pale blogs do not engage in the same critiques of power that are sometimes assumed to characterize the platform as a whole. For example, in the WikiHow article “How to Become a Tumblr Girl,” which covered topics like starting a Tumblr blog, and “Becoming Tumblr Famous,” new bloggers are advised to “try not to be a ‘Social Justice Blogger’” and are referred to other articles on WikiHow that suggest “pale” as a popular genre of blog to begin on Tumblr.⁵

Although pale bloggers may be designated as an apolitical group in discussions of Tumblr, and I have come across the occasional pale blogger who explicitly denies any political—specifically racialized—content or intent, the political and the aesthetic are in fact intimately tied on pale blogs. To borrow a term from David Batchelor, I read pale blog practices as chromophobic, that is, they operate through the privileging of neutral colors and white. “Chromophobia manifests itself in the many and varied attempts to purge colour from culture, to devalue colour, to diminish its significance, to deny its complexity.”⁶ For Batchelor, a chromophobic aversion to color is not just about personal taste but has political commitments to whiteness built into it. Similarly, I argue that the chromophobia of the pale blogs serves this same purpose, reviving and simultaneously camouflaging the desire for the dominant fetish object of the West: the frontier. On pale blogs, frontier is reinvented in digital terms, rendered as an infinite resource that extends forward and backward through time, and is made available again as an object of desire for the millennial generation. Pale blogging is ultimately an exercise in reconciling an anxiety about the possible disappearance of white hegemony as we know it, with the perpetual expansion of white civilization into the technological future.

PALE AND PRETTY

Pale blogs began to appear on the internet as an identifiable type of tumblr in late 2012. In spring 2013, Rosemary Kirton (@grossmary) wrote a piece in *Medium* trying to describe the aesthetic being curated by these tumblrs, which she called “soft culture.”⁷ By the end of 2013, #paleblog was the common marker for these tumblrs and it rose in popularity, only starting to show signs of waning in 2017.

The dominant unifying practice of pale blogging is aesthetic, meaning the aesthetic takes shape in a participatory, performative way as each user likes, shares, and marks content as #pale. Pale blog content can be text, images, videos, or GIFs. Colors are rarely in full saturation and are usually presented in a restricted palette dominated by pastels, soft pinks, grays, blues, and purples. If the color content of an image or GIF goes beyond this palette, often times the image is treated either with some combination of lowered contrast, increased exposure, or a white or faded filter. Some bloggers make these changes themselves, called “edits,” and sometimes blog themes come with built-in features that automatically apply a filter to make images appear faded on the home page of the blog. Pale bloggers avoid any vibrant content, and the limited visual palette reflects the affective expression of pale blogs as well, which is restricted mostly to melancholy, regret, loss, or heartbreak. But even more striking is the explicit rejection of political passions. Accordingly, topics such as social justice are exceptionally out of place on pale blogs and discouraged.

Images and GIFs of bodies are striking elements of pale blogs for their ambiguous stance on self-harm and drug use, their erotic charge, and simultaneously gruesome content. Here the sense of broad white social anxiety is tacitly expressed in the presentation of the body as injured, fragile, or effaced. Pictures of the body often look to be illuminated by the blue light of the device. The drab, overexposed, washed out, or low-contrast images captured by phone or computer cams are fully recuperated in the pale blog aesthetic and valued for this lighting effect on the body. But images of the body are also tightly cropped, so the body is regularly cut off into single body parts between the middle of the face and the thighs. The full-length shot is rare, as is a fully exposed face. The viewer is drawn in close to the body, but is not given full access to it. This interrupted intimacy is heightened by the prevalence of injured body parts on pale blogs. Erotic or pornographic images generally display some sort of damage to the body—lips may be chapped, cracked,

and bleeding; eyes, presented in isolation from the rest of the face, are often bloody or bloodshot; the neck or dramatically protruding collarbone may be covered in bruises or hickies.

There are other aesthetic features of pale blogs beyond the visual. Sometimes pale blogs have embedded music players that cycle through variously ambient, echoey, and forlorn-sounding music by artists like Lana Del Rey or the Arctic Monkeys. The use of music, original layouts, and edits heighten the atmospheric quality of the pale blog. These features simultaneously imbue all the content with ethereality and cement the pervasiveness of the pale aesthetic by linking together images of different kinds, disparate places, and different modes of engagement—watching GIFs or videos, liking, listening—in a kind of synesthetic experience. Taken together, these features transform pale blogs from idiosyncratic collections or archives of content available for a viewer to peruse, to a rich environment populated by fairly regularized kinds of experience, invitations to interact, and modes of stimuli.

PALE LAND: A DIGITAL FRONTIER

Of all the content shared on pale blogs, however, I will argue that it is the relationship facilitated to place, not bodies, that is the defining feature of pale blogs and the site through which they negotiate anxieties around whiteness. While images of people and body parts are shocking and draw a lot of commentary, natural landscapes or cityscapes feature just as often on pale blogs, if not more. Most of the time these images convey a kind of barrenness or isolation, even when they are full of objects; places are usually covered with a thick layer of smog, snow, or rain, and there is rarely human or animal life evident. Pictures of non-domestic sites—like commercial buildings, alleyways, or roads—are usually absent of people, although they may feature some signs of life like fluorescent light and neon signs. The use of light itself is one of the major features of pale blogs. Although most of the content of pale blogs is very low-contrast, shadows feature prominently, as do rainbow or iridescent light. Light reflecting on water, the glow of the moon, the sun through clouds or fog, and lightning bolts are common in pale blog imagery.

In the world of the pale blog, as all locations are confined to the same aesthetic limits and flattened by the hazy pale blog edit, the effect is that all places become abstracted to represent no place in particular. Images of place are not only of sprawling panoramic views, but pale blogs routinely circulate images of light boxes, pools of water, untraceable corners, or animated

settings. In the sheer number of these images, place loses its ability to be located; location is divorced from the idea of a specific, historicized, established geographic space. Therefore, I posit that pale blogs do not so much produce places as they circulate what I am calling “non-places.” As arguably the dominant feature of pale blogs, the circulation of these non-places constructs an account of place itself as virgin territory in the realm of the digital. These non-places form a digital world of “terra nullius” that betrays an extant desire for frontier.

Terra nullius was a policy most closely associated with Australian politics—but present in the projects of European colonialism globally—of claiming a territory to be unoccupied no-man’s land and therefore available for European settlement.⁸ This was a deceptive policy, as practically all the land brought under European rule was quite thoroughly populated, but the process of strategic unseeing of the native people there spread to other aspects of the production of modern life.⁹ Concepts like terra nullius manifest aesthetically in what David Batchelor identifies as chromophobia and “negative hallucination,” both of which he sees as values central to Western art.¹⁰ As aesthetic and political concepts, chromophobia is the aversion to color, while negative hallucination is the refusal to see color even where it is present. Both of these are foundational to the pale blog aesthetic. Indeed, it is these pernicious ties to the act of not seeing or avoiding color that reveals the problematic obsession pale blogs perform regarding place. Pale bloggers claim to be doing nothing political, and yet the central object of pale blogs is the fantasy image of open land, devoid of color or competing authority, ready to be entered. The entire aesthetic practice democratizes participation in white Western narratives that celebrate the enterprising initiative of the imperializing man, whose prerogative is to move into new places, make the unknown known, harbor desires for virgin land, and arrive there to find it already empty.

The desire for virgin territory is central to the notion of beauty on pale blogs. This longing is explicitly expressed in the texts that overlay many landscape and non-place images that offer the viewer and blogger the opportunity to desire space and land, and to share and affirm this desire through posting. Take, for example, one image overlaid with the Lana Del Rey lyric, “It’s you. It’s you. It’s all for you.” The viewer is placed on the shore of an unmarked beach with a view of a verdant island off in the distance, a serene and sprawling inheritance for which she is destined: “It’s all for you.” In sharing this image, the pale blogger is both the viewer to whom the territory belongs and the authoritative voice offering the desire for territory to her followers. The fan-

tasy promoted by this engagement with territory, particularly concentrated in this image but present in the thousands of non-place images that circulate through pale blogs, is dripping with the lust for land that characterizes the West's relationship to frontier.

The production of frontier as a digital resource on pale blogs is a straightforward continuation of the abstraction of frontier that began at the end of the nineteenth century. As David Wrobel compellingly details, the frontier was the characteristic symbol of the American democratic experiment. Many opined that American democracy could only function as long as there was a frontier, a safety valve that could absorb the desires and discontentment of the modern Western man.¹¹ When the land ran out in the late nineteenth century, the West as a whole worked hard to preserve the idea that the frontier was still available by identifying the frontier in other resources. Some solutions advocated imperializing missions into international territory, but many of the new "frontiers" didn't resemble land at all. Frontier was to be found in and satisfied by the terms of the New Deal, the space race, the enterprising business acumen of the modern capitalist, as just a few examples. As Wrobel points out, frontier has historically been an abstracted resource across the West, regardless of its physical supply. The practices of pale blogging grant digital access to the right to frontier and renew the desire for this right. Far from being apolitical, an attachment to whiteness emerges on pale blogs as an attachment to frontier that can be endlessly reproduced with more images and more pale blog edits.

PALE BLOG AESTHETIC IRL: TUMBLR PINK

What I am pointing to is that through the network of relationships catalyzed on Tumblr, the codification of a pale blog aesthetic and the spontaneous craze for Tumblr Pink emerge as a kind of normative spread. My research doesn't account for the ways commercial spaces are made pink; rather it reads the digital buzz about the color and the circulation of the aesthetic as something that creates a kind of political continuity, a series of tiny opportunities to be activated by values of Western expansion, and a craving for eternal frontier. To compare the aesthetics that work to link Tumblr Pink to pale blogs is to track the contagion between platforms and the normative cultivation of broad social taste and desire.

As David Batchelor notes, chromophobic practices are politically important because they are about more than just color. We may read into the aes-

thetic production of pale blogs because “once again, it appears that we are not dealing with something as simple as white things and white surfaces, with white as an empirically verifiable fact or as a colour. Rather, we are in the realm of *whiteness*. White as myth, as an aesthetic fantasy, a fantasy so strong that it summons up negative hallucinations, so intense that it produces a blindness to colour, even when colour is literally in front of your face.”¹² This same question emerges in the craze for Tumblr Pink, which reverberates with the same chromophobic commitments that developed on pale blogs. At the same time that pale blogs have started to unmark themselves as just #aesthetic, Tumblr Pink has also gone through its own unmarking. As it is increasingly associated with being the color of a new generation, symbolizing the frontier of a new future, it is also referred to as Millennial Pink. In a comment requested by *The Cut*, the poet Natalie Diaz relates, “A more accurate color than Millennial Pink might be: white. . . . A shady white, as white can be so often.”¹³ Diaz was critiquing the way the Millennial or Tumblr Pink trend valorizes the neutral (where neutrality suggests whiteness) over vibrant colors in the construction of physical space. As Tumblr Pink has spread as the latest color in interior design, it has also extended to things like billboards and advertising materials that inserted long intervals of matte white space into the visual landscape, analogous to the digital production of empty frontier on pale blogs.

The most authoritative example of Tumblr Pink was one half of Pantone’s color of the year for 2016, Rose Quartz. The color of the year from 2016 was actually two colors, Rose Quartz (a pale pink) and Serenity (a pastel blue). These colors were presented as a pair, often blended into each other, which



Fig. 33.2. Advertisement for Pantone’s color of the year, Rose Quartz

reproduced the grayish bruise value that is also central to the pale blog aesthetic (figure 33.2). Even more striking, the marketing materials for Rose Quartz and Serenity built from classic pale blog aesthetic markers in opposition to political conflict.

Pantone releases a promotional video along with the marketing materials that announce the color of the year. The purpose of the video is to demonstrate the mood the color conveys and to give examples of its possible use in design. Unlike the promo videos of Pantone's other colors of the year, which focus mostly on the color itself, the video for Rose Quartz and Serenity contextualizes the popularity of the colors historically. The dual colors of the year for 2016 are presented in contrast to 2015, a year the video characterizes as one of political and social unrest.¹⁴

The video opens with "2015" in white block letters fading in on a black background. For the first twenty seconds, the music is percussive and fast-paced. Clicking electronic and industrial sounds are layered over a series of quick cuts and double exposures. The sounds of typing and texting are paired with fireworks and missiles launching; a shot of the side of a glacier breaking off and falling into the sea is followed by children being bullied in an alley; there are protests, people texting, taking selfies, or waiting in long lines; marching boots, dividing cells, the Facebook-like logo, and droning alarms all combine in a hectic cacophony. The chaos finally fades as the Pantone logo appears on the screen to present the dual "Color of the Year 2016," Rose Quartz and Serenity in a puff of pink and blue powder. The soundscape of the last half of the video features soothing piano tones, the faint chirping of birds, and the long-held whole notes of a softly singing choir. In this piece of the video, none of the background images emit their own diegetic noises. Instead, the images are all presented in the same visual and aural aesthetic of Rose Quartz and Serenity. In white block letters, the words "BALANCE," "CALMING," and "WELLNESS" are overlaid on different scenes showing parts of female figures draped in billowing, gossamer fabric in Serenity and Rose Quartz ombré. The colors of the year are also presented as light, emanating from two glowing cubes, or shining on large cumulous clouds as though during sunset. Finally, a classic pale blog landscape image fades in, a foggy winter shot of a river in the forest in a blue and pink filter. The landscape is overlaid with the word "TRANQUILITY."

Rose Quartz and Serenity are meant to form the basis of an aesthetic experience that brings about the resolution of political turmoil. Commenting on the color, Leatrice Eiseman, the executive director of the Pantone Color Institute, ominously described, "Joined together, Rose Quartz and Serenity

demonstrate an inherent balance between a warmer embracing rose tone and the cooler tranquil blue, reflecting connection and wellness as well as a soothing sense of order and peace.”¹⁵ This order is to be achieved through the flattening effect also at work in the pale blog aesthetic, in the sense of uniformity it helps to establish. Tumblr Pink is often juxtaposed with the supposed contentiousness of our political times as a color that manifests “quietude.”¹⁶ While this rhetoric reinforces conservative claims of the impending upheavals to Western society, it also deftly displaces the political into the aesthetic, where appreciating standardization and rejecting the disruption of the status quo can be rewritten as fashionable and not politically suspect. Quietude promises the feeling of total escape from political concerns. Contextualized alongside the rise of the pale blog aesthetic, however, the craze for Tumblr Pink camouflages a conservative set of normative, long-held desires the modern West harbors for power that are on display in the trend but disavowed and unmarked.

NOTES

1. Darcie Wilder, “Im in a Grouptext about How Everything Looks like This Now, pic.Twitter.Com/Gfn8BKA4Xg,” Tweet, @33333333433333 (blog), July 10, 2016, <https://twitter.com/33333333433333/status/759038739951788032?lang=en>.

2. André Wheeler, “How ‘Tumblr Pink’ Became the Most Ubiquitous Color in Fashion Branding,” *Fashionista*, August 11, 2016, <http://fashionista.com/2016/08/tumblr-pink-fashion-color-trend>; Lauren Schwartzberg, “Why Millennial Pink Refuses to Go Away,” *The Cut*, March 19, 2017, <http://nymag.com/thecut/2017/03/why-millennial-pink-refuses-to-go-away.html>.

3. The question of how to study pale blogs was not straightforward. According to the ages many pale bloggers posted on their pages, the majority of them were young teens when they began making pale blogs. While everything I researched was technically public content, it was not clear whether pale bloggers actively consented to the public dissemination of their blogs beyond Tumblr or wished to be identified as the curators of the content they share. Pale blogs, however, do not have any strong thought leaders. Pale blog networks have popped up and gone defunct just as quickly, and even the most popular pages regularly go dormant or come down without warning. What this signals is that pale blogging is not about an individual tastemaker; rather it exists as the product of a collective set of actions, tastes, and desires.

4. Recent studies have shown that demographic shifts along with poor health outcomes and economic stagnation are contributing to a sense that whites are increasingly discriminated against or will be discriminated against in the future. Don-

ald Trump's campaign slogan was indicative of this sense of loss and commitment to returning to a prior state of open racial dominance in the plea to #MAGA (Make America Great *Again*). For scholarship on this question see Michael I. Norton and Samuel R. Sommers, "Whites See Racism as a Zero-Sum Game That They Are Now Losing," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6, no. 3 (2011): 215–18; Maureen A. Craig and Jennifer A. Richeson, "On the Precipice of a 'Majority-Minority' America: Perceived Status Threat From the Racial Demographic Shift Affects White Americans' Political Ideology," *Psychological Science* 25, no. 6 (June 1, 2014): 1189–97, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614527113>.

5. "How to Become a Tumblr Girl," wikiHow, <http://www.wikihow.com/Become-a-Tumblr-Girl>.

6. David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 22.

7. Rosemary Kirton, "Follow For More: Screenshots of Soft Culture," *Medium* (blog), November 12, 2013, <https://medium.com/@grossmaryk/follow-for-more-screenshots-of-soft-culture-49432de8f13e>. Because of the speed with which trends rise and fall on the internet, Kirton thought her commentary was already "worryingly stale" when she finally published her piece, first on Tumblr in October 2013 and later on Medium.com in November 2013. But Kirton was compelled to write this piece trying to analyze pale blogs because she noticed that images of her art or her face were being shared, uncredited, across these tumblrs.

8. Andrew Fitzmaurice, "The Genealogy of Terra Nullius," *Australian Historical Studies* 38, no. 129 (April 1, 2007): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10314610708601228>.

9. This "unseeing" was in no way benign, and as it has formed the basis of Western aesthetic practice, it is as informed by the elimination of color from the palette as it is by the genocidal elimination of colonized populations, programs of assimilation, and institutional forms of erasure.

10. Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 47.

11. David M. Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993).

12. Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 47.

13. Schwartzberg, "Why Millennial Pink Refuses to Go Away."

14. Pantone, *The Pantone Color of the Year for 2016 Is Rose Quartz & Serenity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AAJ1vPe4w2c>.

15. Pantone, "Pantone Color of the Year 2016 | Rose Quartz & Serenity," *Pantone*, <https://www.pantone.com/color-of-the-year-2016>.

16. Wheeler, "How 'Tumblr Pink' Became the Most Ubiquitous Color in Fashion Branding."